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Molly Raphael
Multnomah County Library

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A Challenging Decision in a Changing Environment:

Options for Internet Access at the Multnomah County Library

by Molly Raphael
Director
Multnomah County Library

Consideration of context is essential in making policy decisions, particularly for local government entities. Historically, Multnomah County, specifically the city of Portland, has developed a reputation for involving residents in civic matters, as described in Robert Putnam's *Better Together: Restoring the American Community* (Simon & Schuster, 2003). That history contributes significantly to the expectations of residents that their concerns will be considered in decision-making by local government officials.

Public libraries should and do reflect the communities they serve. As communities change, decisions that seemed "right" for a particular community at one time may not be the best at another time. Multnomah County residents have diverse points of view on issues, even though a majority of voters have a reputation for supporting progressive liberal positions. Crafting solutions that recognize diverse positions is challenging, particularly in an environment where people feel intensely about an issue.

Protecting intellectual freedom and the right to open access to information is the foundation of the library profession. Applying those principles in a local context is a continuing challenge for library leaders and policy makers.

The Multnomah County Library (MCL) has an additional reason for paying close attention to the constituencies it serves: over half of its funding is derived from a local option levy that voters are asked to support every few years. In other words, unlike many public libraries, MCL has a very direct relationship with voters. Ignoring how voters feel about library issues could have dire financial consequences and could devastate the library's ability to serve its community.

In 2004, I recommended a change in MCL's Internet access policy, a change that was eventually adopted unanimously by the Board of County Commissioners (BCC).

MCL had been a named plaintiff in the lawsuit challenging the constitutionality of the Children's Internet Protection Act (CIPA), which mandated Internet filtering as a requirement to qualify for federal telecommunication subsidies. Yet there were and continue to be vocal members of the community who supported filtering as well as those who were adamantly opposed to any filtering. The CIPA decision by the U.S. Supreme Court in June 2003 upheld the law and meant that MCL, like libraries around the country, had to decide whether to comply and require mandatory filtering for children and teens, or forego the federal funds.

MCL's Advisory Board's Access Policy Committee studied the issue extensively for months and analyzed options before recommending to the full Board that MCL not comply with CIPA, but allow parents the option of filtering their own children's access. This was a change from the choice for filtered or unfiltered access that all library users had experienced. (Recently installed Pharos software for booking time on MCL computers allowed implementation of this option of the Board's recommendation.) The full Library Board, which is advisory to the BCC as well as to the MCL Director, adopted the Access Committee's recommendation in April 2004.

Over the next several weeks, I sought input from staff. I invited not only managers but also all staff to share their opinions on Internet access and filtering. I discussed the issue with managers and youth librarians at meetings and had an extended, thoughtful discussion with senior managers before making my decision. I asked staff to consider not just the absolute principles of intellectual freedom, but also the positions of our diverse community. I heard from employees in a variety of positions who were passionate about not filtering for any library user. I heard from employees who were parents, some of whom were staunch defenders of intellectual freedom, who talked about the challenges of raising



MULTNOMAH COUNTY LIBRARY
Parental Filtering Choice Form

Multnomah County Library filters Internet sessions for children ages 12 and younger. The library offers young people ages 13–17 the choice of filtered or unfiltered searching at each log-in. Multnomah County Library supports the right and responsibility of parents to make choices about their own children's Internet access. Parents may choose to override these default Internet access options for their children.

If you would like to change your child's Internet filtering options, please complete this form, read the following statements, and sign below.

I wish to change the Internet filtering default for my child _____, age _____.
(first name, last name)

Please check the correct box below:

- ☐ **My child is age 12 or younger.** I want my child to have the choice to filter or not filter Internet sessions.
- ☐ **My child is age 13–17.** I want my child to have filtered Internet access only. I understand that Internet filters are not perfect. They will not always block sites that I may find objectionable. The filter may block information that my child needs and that should not be blocked.
- I will notify my child of this change in filtering option.
 - I understand that this change in filtering option will become part of my child's electronic library record and will be effective within three business days.
 - I have talked to my child about online safety and about our family's rules for Internet use in the library.
 - I understand that use of the Internet during Teen Lounge/Homework Center and computer lab sessions does not require log-in with a library card, and mandatory filtering cannot be enforced in these circumstances. All customers using the Internet in these settings, regardless of age, will be given the option to choose filtered or unfiltered searching at each log-in. In addition, e-mail service cannot be filtered.
 - I attest that I am the custodial parent or legal guardian of this child.

F-CIRC-38
02.05

MULTNOMAH COUNTY
LIBRARY 

Parent's signature

Child's library card number

children in today's world and the need they felt for having as many tools and options as possible.

What emerged from these discussions was that the real concern we had was about access for teens. Most staff felt that filtered access for children would not have much impact on the kinds of information they sought, but the nature of being a teen meant that access to important Web sites would be blocked by filters. Youth librarians and others were deeply concerned about teens not having access to topics such as date rape or sexual identity, Web sites that would certainly be blocked by filters.

After careful consideration of the Library Board's recommendation and staff input, I proposed a policy change, one that would not meet CIPA's requirements. I recommended to the BCC, the policy-setting body for MCL, that we implement a three-tiered policy: default filtered access for children 12 and under with a parental option to make unfiltered access available; default choice of filtered or unfiltered for 13 through 17 year olds, with a parental option

to choose filtered only; and a choice of filtered or unfiltered for those 18 and over.

Initially, all five BCC members leaned toward supporting my proposal. At a public hearing, we expected those who supported filtered access only would turn out in force; they did not. In our eagerness to have balanced public testimony on the proposed change, we "recruited" eloquent spokespersons (Ursula LeGuin, for example), who opposed default filtering for any age. After intense work with a couple of the Commissioners to address their concerns (one who had doubts about any filtering and the other who wanted default filtering for teens as well as children), we managed to achieve a 5–0 vote supporting our plan. I believed strongly that given the divisiveness of this issue, a 5–0 vote was critical, even though a 3–2 vote would have been sufficient for adoption.

The implementation process was extremely complicated, involving the Pharos booking system interacting with our Dynix patron database. On March 21, 2005, three months after the BCC's adoption, the new




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policy went into effect. We included a process for unblocking Web sites that are erroneously blocked. Interestingly, our first request to change the default setting was from the mother of an 8-year-old girl who wanted her daughter to have unfiltered access. During the nearly three months of operation, we have had 40 requests to change the default settings (divided roughly in half for unfiltered access for 12 and under and filtered access for teens) and a handful of requests to unblock Web sites.

Overall, we are pleased with our decision and the process that led us to it. We believe we considered the divergent points-of-view in Multnomah County,

protecting intellectual freedom and open access while supporting parents' rights to make decisions for their own children. Do we believe that the issue of filtering the Internet is over as a result of that decision? Of course not; it will never be over. 

Molly Raphael is the Director of the Multnomah County Library. Prior to her current position, she served as Director of the District of Columbia Public Library in Washington, DC. She has been an active member of the American Library Association for 30 years, currently serving as an ALA Councilor-at-Large.

How to Stay Perky

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more donations than the last bond. Our local newspaper lent great support, and used every opportunity to illustrate the benefits of a new main library. Our ads on the radio station pushed every button possible, from children talking, to a singer singing one of our "Singing Librarians" songs.

Our second campaign clearly benefited by reworking the telephone bank. The County Employees' Union donated money and provided the voter update list so those who had not voted were called each week until they did! With volunteers fully briefed, and provided with information sheets, every current voter in Tillamook County was called during the early evening hours as soon as mail-in ballots were distributed.

The September 2003 election resulted in a far heavier turnout and saw the Tillamook Library bond pass by 51 percent!

Ground breaking for our new facility occurred on March 26, 2005. Fund

raising has so far added \$630,000, to our \$3,700,000 bond. The bids were opened May 24th. The Commissioners voted to approve the contractor on June 8th. We plan to open July 1, 2006 exactly 10 years since the Library Board voted to go for a new Library!

Without the hardworking efforts of the Library PAC, Board, Foundation, Staff, the Commissioners, as well as our supportive patrons, we would still have the ugliest, outgrown, falling apart library in the State of Oregon! Change can be a lot of work, but the benefits are wonderful. 

Sara Charlton, Tillamook County Library Director, 1998-99 OLA President, 1999-2005 Legislative Committee member, 1992-95 Public Relation Chair, Trainer of the Library parades ferrets, Tap Dancer-member of the Dancing Fools and 2005 Gold Medal (Second Place) International Dance Competition!

